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FAMILY TIES

Why Lying Can Make Sense PART I

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Children about the ages of six to eight lie when they are anxious to exert their independence and still need the approving love and security of their parents and others. Sometimes they think they can behave as they choose, as long as they cover their tracks ... by lying.

Lying becomes prevalent again with the onset of puberty. Teens are often insecure about their identity and think they aren't living up to the expectations of adults. They are also sorting through their bewildering emotions, new feelings, and changing bodies. Adults' responses often drive their children away from them and into the arms of their peers.

A friend of mine told me about an interesting experience. He was in a store when a mother rushed up to her daughter and demanded, "How many times do I have to tell you not to touch the toys?"

The child answered, "Eleven!"

The mother lost it right there, and yelled, "What do you mean eleven?"

"I don't know," said the child.

Sometimes "I don't know" is the only safe answer. This child already knew her mother wasn't interested in a thoughtful response. What her mother *really* wanted was to make her feel dumb, inadequate, and childish in order to control her behavior.

At the checkout stand, my friend saw another encounter when a boy about thirteen heard this from his father. "Why are you angry?"

Stephen said he really wanted to give this father an honest answer on behalf of the boy. He wanted to say, "Because a passing frontal system has upset the pressure gradient in ways that are producing subtle changes in your son's limbic system. That, together with the overabundance of highly processed starch, sugar, fats, and carbohydrates that

he was saturated with at lunch and the frustration of trying to contain all those ambient calories without moving, wiggling, or fidgeting through three hours of classes, created a lot of pent-up energy and frustration that he carried onto the school bus. There he was told to, 'Sit down. Shut up. Close the window. Pipe down. I'm going to tell your parents. You are going to get a suspension for this.' Your son then stepped off the bus with all that going on and added a dose of caffeine and sugar from a Pepsi plus theobromine from a brownie, which went roaring up through the inherited instability of his hypothalamus from three generations of alcoholics in his pedigree—not to mention the normal instability due to puberty. All of this turbulence then bounced off a massive dose of testosterone flowing through him, which greatly magnified the frustration of trying to meet and anticipate adult expectations all day. In short, it was more than he could handle."

The boy himself said simply, "Because!"

The father said, "What do you mean, because?"

And the boy gave back, "I don't know"—the only safe answer.

In the next column we'll explore some other ways these parents could have handled these situations.

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

